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ABSTRACT

Noting that a gap exists between desired and actual literacy levels in the United States, this paper argues that the issue of literacy should be addressed holistically. Proposing that the communication skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking are integrated and support each other, the paper reviews research indicating the interrelationships among the skills and advocating the language experience approach as an effective, holistic way of developing these interrelationships. (FL)

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A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO LANGUAGE LITERACY

Presented at the Annual Conference
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A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO LANGUAGE LITERACY

Over the last few decades, education in America has qualitatively and quantitatively improved. However, educational research, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, continues to indicate that a gap exists between the desired literacy levels and the actualized levels of English language proficiency. While attempts have been made to address this issue through the adoption and implementation of commercial reading or language programs, few have addressed literacy holistically.

The thesis of this article is that language literacy is best approached holistically, that is, when the communication skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking are allowed to integrate and support each other. This article will describe research which supports the interrelationships between the communication skills and which supports the language experience approach, as a holistic approach to the development of thse communication skills.

Basic literacy can be defined as the ability to effectively utilize and exploit written language and its resources in achieving desired outcomes. However, Graves (1975) states that the focus of Elementary school literacy instruction is weighed heavily in favor of reading; as is the content of teacher training programs for

elementary teachers. At the same time, he provides evidence of a decline in the time that students spend writing and in the amount of writing that students actually produce in a given year.

This lack of cohesion is noted by Cloer (1977), who states that educators are presently required to take fragmented language arts goals and objectives and arrange them into some cohesive classroom program and in doing so, are probably pulling back together what never should have been parted. He adds that the language arts for too long have been taught in a fragmented manner with the hope that students will successfully bring about intregration at some future time.

Walker (1978), continues this line of reasoning when he states that children learn oral language as a functional system, one which is useful for the attainining of desired purposes; and that they learn language as a part of and along with purposeful interaction with other people. He feels that this is crucial in beginning reading while attitudes to written language were being formed. He follows that children should learn the written form of language in a similar way. In addition, he believes that reading should not be apart from other learning and that we should choose topics from concepts which children of that age should encounter across the whole range of the school curriculum. However, research conduct by

Walker (1978) suggests that the language used in newspapers and periodicals intended for adult readers is closer to the oral language of even five year old children, than is the language of the basal readers written for children of that age in respect to the core units of language.

Spearitt (1979) in his research on the developing patterns of relationships among the communication skills stated that while the 4 communication skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) can be identified as measuring different aspects of language in terms of actual outcomes, that this does not necessarily mean that they should be treated as separate skills for teaching purposes; the same outcomes could occur in an integrated curriculum in which differences among the skills were deliberately played down. He follows, however, that it is probable, that if some aspects of the language curriculum are relatively neglected, children will fail to realize their full potential in language. Finally, Walker (1978) concludes that teachers of reading and writing should build on the impressive and highly functional oral language system which children bring to their formal education for literacy.

The active and formal integration of the communication skills in holistic classroom instruction such as the Language Experience Approach, can be traced to about 1900. While Meriam (1933) advocated using the language experience approach with Mexican-American children whose background

made existing books inappropriate, interest in, and application of Language Experience Approach to the teaching of reading and other communication skills for all students has expanded since late 1950's.

Hall (1978) defines the language experience approach for teaching reading as a method in which instruction is built upon the use of reading materials created by writing down children's spoken language. He states that the student created reading materials represent both the experiences and the language patterns of the learner and that the four communication processes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are integrated in the language arts and reading instruction. While language experience approach (LEA) is the most common name for instruction of this description, other terms, such as the language arts approach (LAA) or an integrated language arts program are often used.

The first large-scale American attempt to employ LEA as a strategy for teaching reading occured in 1962 with the Reading Study Project which included 12 elementary school districts in San Diego County, California. The general conclusion was that during the first 3 years of elementary school, LEA can be an effective way of teaching reading.

Many research studies followed. Among them, Hahn (1967), noted that LEA pupils were superior to basal reading and I.T.A. pupils at the end of one year in both

word reading and vocabulary. During the second year of the study, he found that LEA pupils preformed significantly better on ten of fourteen standardized tests used and in number of words running and books read.

Vilscek's (1967) found that LEA pupils were superior in longitudinal study at end of first grade to basal pupils in word reading, paragraph reading, vocabulary, phonics, word lists, and attitude toward reading. At end of second year, his study concluded that LEA pupils were superior to basal students on tests of spelling, arithmetic concepts, science and social sciences.

Stauffer and Hammond (1967) conducted a longitudinal study of the Language Experience Approach verses a basal approach and found that at the end of first grade LEA pupils were superior to the basal subjects in word reading, paragraph reading, oral accuracy, three word lists, writing mechanics, and number of running words in composition.

Stauffer and Hammond (1969) refined their study and found after a three year study that the language experience approach pupils were superior in originality of content, consistency in story sequence, number of poly-syllabic words in the children's writing, spelling, science, social studies concepts, oral rate and accuracy, word lists, writing mechanics and the number of running and different words.

Kendrick and Bennett (1967) reported low socio-economic boys were superior to basal pupils in attutide toward read-

ing, while both sexes were superior in number of words in Language Experience Approach compositions at the end of first year. They found that at end of second year, all LEA pupils were superior in total at words used in speaking and that low socio-economic pupils of both sexes were superior in science and social studies on standardized tests.

Evanechko, Ollila, and Armstrong (1974) have investigated the relationship between reading and writing outcomes, as measured by reading achievement tests and measures of written syntactic complexity. They found reading and writing to be significantly correlated for a sample of sixth graders; although they noted that it is difficult to relate these results to an understanding of how reading and writing processes are related.

Spache (1976) in summarizing several studies, concluded that pupils taught by LEA are helped to grow in writing ability, in length of their compositions and spelling. He suggested the LEA pupils do develop broad informational backgrounds in science and social science by the end of their second and third years of training. He stated that development in word reading, paragraph reading, and vocabulary is at least as great as in basal programs.

In a study of reading readiness, conducted by Brazziel and Terrell (1962) in which a 6 week readiness program for 1 class of 26 culturally disadvantaged children which emphasized the use of experience charts, it was found

that language experience materials provided meaningful reading content for disadvantaged children when used in connection with other readiness activities and materials. Although they note that in the combined program it was hard to measure only the effects of experience charts they found that the LEA students did significantly higher on Metropolitan Readiness Test than 3 experimental groups.

In the wake of our continued educational growth it is of interest to note that the number of studies which support a holistic approach to developing literacy are not limited to those presented here and that new research studies continue to provide additional information for designing effective school literacy programs. As educators we need to build upon our successes with children and to help children to develop positive attitudes toward reading. In doing so, we must outline programs of planned interventions which coordinate the communication skills.

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